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# The Triple Revolving Vase

A Farewell Tribute  
from Tang Ying to His Emperor

Sotheby's | 蘇富比

HONG KONG

THE TRIPLE REVOLVING VASE

26 NOVEMBER 2024 | HK1524



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# The Triple Revolving Vase

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# An Animated Hunting Triptych

## A Farewell Tribute from Tang Ying to his Emperor?

Regina Krah

The Qing emperors’ most important endeavours to uphold their Manchu traditions were the retainment of the Manchu language besides the Chinese, and the continuation of mounted archery. Hunting, which revived practices of their Manchu ancestors, required excellent equestrian skills and the competent use of bow and arrow, or spear, and for the Manchu rulers was an exercise of vital importance in ways both practical and symbolic. It exhibited the emperor’s competence and physical strength, provided training of techniques also required in war, helped bonding the troops and reinforced ties to foreign tribes that were invited to participate. Already in 1683, the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662-1722) had chosen Mulan at Chengde in Rehe (Jehol), northeast of Beijing, beyond the Great Wall, modern Hebei, a scenic hilly, wooded area that was teeming with game, as an imperial hunting ground.<sup>1</sup>

“[T]he present artefact is a conceptional and technical miracle....”

The Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795), who as a young boy had accompanied his grandfather to hunts at Mulan – which his father, the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723-1735) did not enjoy – was even more fervently attached to the imperial hunts. He institutionalized regular training hunts in the third year of his reign (1738), and continuously enlarged them to ‘unprecedented scale’. Regular autumn hunts involved Manchu and Mongol soldiers of the Eight Banners, but also high court officials and representatives from neighbouring Asian tribes.

The emperor travelled to Chengde accompanied by a huge entourage, which also included the women and children of his extended family. He continued to attend to government business as usual, as thousands of officials temporarily relocated there as well. The area was thus gradually turned into a temporary summer capital with an imperial residence, *Bishu shanzhuang*, with several temples, and with gardens with pavilions and artificial lakes. Court painters, including Jesuits such as Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688-1766) and Jean-Denis Attiret (Wang Zhicheng, 1702-1768), were regularly ordered to Mulan to record the imperial hunts as well as other official ceremonies there and to portray high-ranking guests.

For the days of the hunt, the hunting party would camp in tents, and the Emperor also enjoyed to receive foreign envoys in his imperial yellow yurt, including in 1793 Lord Macartney (1737-1806), the British envoy of King George III (r. 1760-1801) who, in spite of the failure of his mission, enthusiastically described the location:

... so rich, so various, so beautiful, so sublime a prospect my eyes had never beheld ...

It is one of the finest forest scenes in the world, wild, woody, mountainous and rocky, abounding with stags and deer of different species, and most of the other beasts of chase, not dangerous to man. In many places immense woods, chiefly oaks, pines, and chestnuts, grow upon perpendicular steeps, and force their sturdy roots through every resistance of surface and of soil, where vegetation would seem almost impossible. These woods

often clamber over the loftiest pinnacles of the stony hills or, gathering on the skirts of them, descend with a rapid sweep and bury themselves in the deepest vallies [sic]. There at proper distances you find palaces, banqueting houses, and monasteries (but without bonzes) adapted to the situation and peculiar circumstances of the place...<sup>2</sup>

The Qianlong Emperor spent a couple of months a year at Chengde, and while the autumn hunt also basically took place every year, there were years when it had to be cancelled, for example, when the Emperor visited the ancestral graves in Mukden or when he received an important foreign delegation. In 1753, he had further increased the number of officials and of resident hunting guards at Mulan, but 1754 was one of those years when the hunt did not take place. Could this be why Tang Ying (1682-1756), the observant supervisor of the imperial kilns at far-away Jiangxi, submitted to the Emperor in that year a triple revolving vase with a hunting theme?

The *Archives of the Imperial Workshops* at Jingdezhen record for the 12th November 1754 the submission of a ‘triple first’ (*sanyuan*, after the expression for attaining the highest ranks in the three civil examinations, local, provincial and court) revolving vase (fig. 1); the *Qing Court Inventories* of Beijing state that on the 17th December of that year a foreign-style (*yang ci*) ‘triple





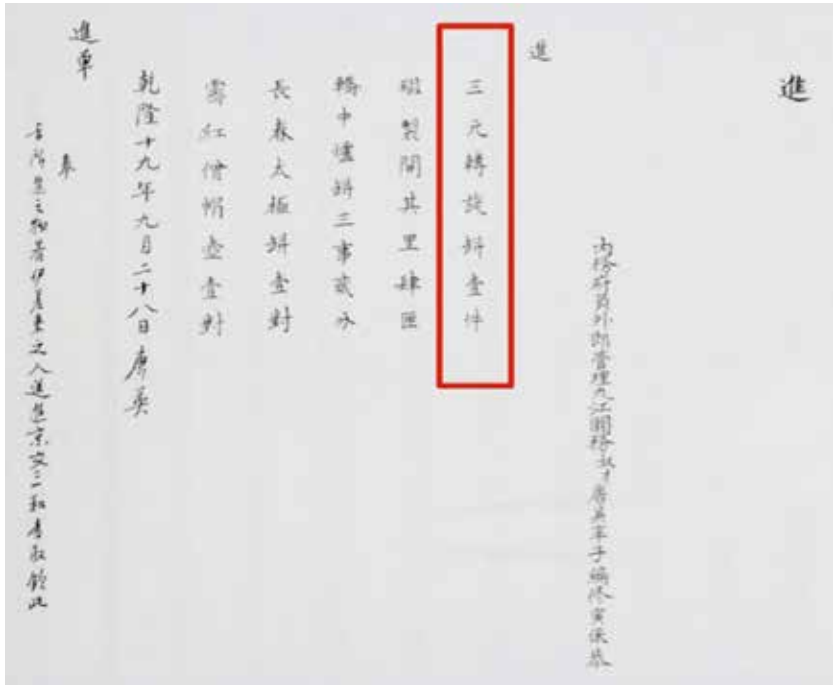


fig. 1  
An entry in the Archives of the Imperial Workshops at Jingdezhen, dated to 12th November 1754

圖一 景德鎮《清宮瓷器檔案》乾隆十九年（1742年）九月二十八日記錄 出處：《清宮瓷器檔案全集》，卷4，頁186

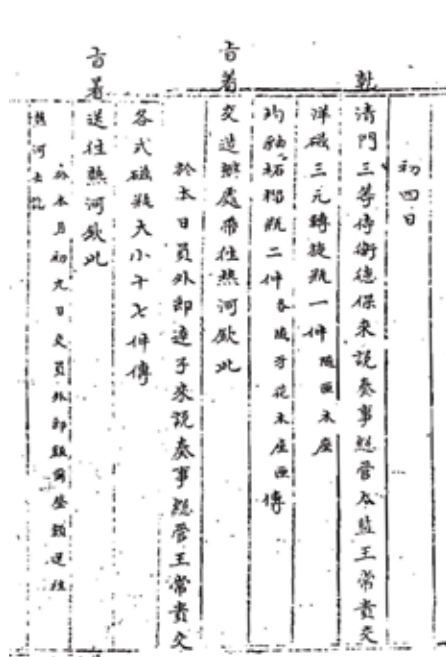


fig. 2  
An entry in the Qing Court Inventories of Beijing, dated to 17th December 1754

圖二 北京《清宮內務府造辦處活計檔》中乾隆十九年（1742年）十一月初四記錄

first' revolving vase with fitted box and wooden stand was presented to the Emperor (fig. 2). Five days later, the vase was sent to Jehol, as this was clearly the obvious place for this ingenious creation.

Tang Ying, himself a bannerman of the Plain White Banner, worked at the court already as a teenager and "accompanied the Kangxi Emperor on his many expeditions throughout the country".<sup>3</sup> So, he very likely also took part in some of that emperor's hunting trips to Chengde, where he would have experienced this amazing spectacle first-hand; and he was certainly well-informed about the equal hunting addiction of the Qianlong Emperor. He had intimate knowledge of the potter's craft, had designed porcelains for Jingdezhen already while still in Beijing, and in Jingdezhen watched over the production of important imperial commissions and tribute pieces himself. Only the exceptional combination of all these factors made the conception and completion of a totally extraordinary piece like the present work possible in the south, far away from Beijing.

One of the Qianlong emperor's rare complaints of low quality in 1741 had triggered one of the most creative periods of Jingdezhen's imperial kilns. The fact that porcelain painting experienced a peak in the palace workshops in Beijing around that time, where imperial painters could be recruited, meant that Jingdezhen had to impress the emperor in different ways. The first of the highly complex reticulated revolving vases, the epitome of precision potting and firing and not surprisingly deemed by some as 'the work of the gods',<sup>4</sup> were completed in 1742 and most were made between 1742 and 1744. In these years, Tang Ying had granted the emperor wondrous spectacles, where through the vases' pierced openings he could watch fishes swimming past, children on hobby horses riding by, Europeans approaching with gifts, and similar scenes. Thereafter, the development of such wonder-works seems to have been drastically reduced, if not temporarily abandoned, due to their enormous costs, which were considerable even for the court.

"To make it work like an automaton, to let the vases revolve together, when a single neck is turned, required a true piece of engineering inside the body and further fired parts, in form of a system of interlocking cog wheels."







By 1754, Tang Ying no longer had anything to prove to his emperor, but in order to impress once more a ruler, who had seen it all, it was not sufficient to present just one more revolving vase; he had to aim even higher. That the present artefact is a conceptional and technical miracle does not need to be stressed, but it is worth looking at it in more detail. A reticulated revolving vase normally consisted of four parts (foot, body, inner core and neck); by joining together three vases the potters increased the number of individually fired sections to eight (triple foot, triple body, three inner cores, three necks). To make it work like an automaton, to let the vases revolve together, when a single neck is turned (the outer vases turning in the opposite direction of the inner one), required a true piece of engineering inside the body and further fired parts, in form of a system of interlocking cog wheels. To raise the number of openings – here, a large series of shaped cut-outs around the shoulder of each vase in addition to the main ‘windows’ – generated not only much extra work, but in addition tremendously increased the risk of distortion of the vessel in the kiln, as well as requiring further painting on areas of the inner vases that were thus exposed. That even extra handles – twelve on our piece – made the overall work much more complex is reflected in the fact that they added considerably to the overall cost of an item.<sup>5</sup>

But if this vase leaves us speechless as a feat of intricate strategic planning and unbelievably fastidious craftsmanship, at least as admirable is the design idea in the first place. As if looking through the windows in a garden wall, the emperor could watch, half hidden through a web of trees and auspicious rainbow-coloured

clouds, an imperial hunt that would come to life as soon as a vase was turned, where deer and boar, running startled through lush greenery, were pursued by mounted archers, equestrians with spears, and dogs.

This piece could be understood as the crowning glory of Tang Ying’s career, after a quarter century of supervising Jingdezhen’s imperial production. It was undoubtedly one of his most fanciful and ambitious projects and probably among the last pieces of importance completed during his tenure, two years before his death, at the age of 73. It is certainly one of his most inventive and memorable masterpieces. Might it have been intended as a farewell tribute to the Emperor, whom he had served for so long, before retiring?

This reticulated revolving triple vase is unique and nothing truly comparable to this vessel exists.

The only piece that bears some relation to it is a large blue-glazed, covered, single revolving vase in the Nanjing Museum with four circular openings providing a view onto an imperial inspection tour inside, with a party on horseback surrounded by kowtowing subjects, similarly viewed through a web of trees and clouds, and perhaps made around the same time; see *Qing Imperial Porcelain of the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong Reigns*, Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 1995, cat. no. 98; and Huo Hua, ‘Qing guanyao jiqing you fencai Qianlong xingwei tu zhuanxuan ping yanjiu [Research on a Qing official-ware azure-blue glazed *famille rose* revolving vase with a depiction of a Qianlong inspection tour]’, *Dongnan wenhua*, 1997, no. 2, pp. 132-40 (fig. 3).

"It is certainly one of his most inventive and memorable masterpieces. Might it have been intended as a farewell tribute to the Emperor, whom he had served for so long, before retiring?"

<sup>1</sup> For the importance of Chengde to the Qing empire see James A. Millward, Ruth W. Dunnell, Mark C. Elliot and Philippe Forêt, eds, *New Qing Imperial History. The making of Inner Asian empire at Qing Chengde*, Abingdon, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> John Barrow, *Some Account of the Public Life, and a Selection from the Unpublished Writings, of the Earl of Macartney*, London, 1807, vol. 2, pp. 273-4.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Lam, ‘Tang Ying (1682-1756). The Imperial Factory Superintendent at Jingdezhen’, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 63, 1998-9, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Liao Pao Show (Liao Baoxiu), *Huali cai ci: Qianlong yangcai/Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Ch’ien-lung Reign*, Palace Museum, Taipei, 2008, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> The surprising costs of adding handles are recorded in a list of material and labour costs of closed vessel forms compiled by Tang Ying in 1747; they added even more to the overall price than openwork did; see Peter Y.K. Lam, ‘Towards a Dating Framework for Qianlong Imperial Porcelain’, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 74, 2009-10, pp. 30-31.



# 射獵綏遠：唐英致皇帝之告別鉅作

康蕊君

滿文國語與騎馬射獵，為大清皇帝最重視之滿族傳統。騎射狩獵傳統，溯自滿清先祖，重騎術，搭配弓箭或擲矛，對於滿清帝王而言，無論是實用層面或象徵意義，皆至關重要。作為習武演練，可強健體魄，展現帝王武功，鍛鍊八旗戰力，加強軍隊士氣，並邀請藩部隨團，穩定國防且增進外交。早在1683年，康熙皇帝（在位1662-1722年），已擇定熱河承德木蘭，作為皇室狩獵用地。此乃現址河北，位於北京東北方、長城之外，當地丘壑連綿，草木蓊鬱，飛鳥走獸，生意盎然。<sup>1</sup>

## 「三元轉旋瓶的構思與燒造技術，可謂奇蹟。」

乾隆皇帝（在位1736-1795年）少年時，曾伴隨祖父至木蘭圍獵，其父雍正帝不好此道，但乾隆帝極為熱衷。乾隆三年，下旨定期舉辦秋獮大典，更持續擴大規模，盛況前所未見。秋獮以滿蒙八旗軍隊為主體，朝廷重臣與諸藩部王公，亦為受邀之列。

前往承德的行團隊伍，盛大浩蕩，包含皇室成員，婦孺老少。朝廷議事照舊，數千朝臣一併移至承德辦公。如此陣仗，使得承德宛若夏季的國都，皇居「避暑山莊」、多座寺院、花園、亭閣與湖泊，一應俱全。西洋宮廷畫師，包括郎世寧（1688-1766年）與王致誠（1702-1768年），常隨駕至木蘭，負責描繪記錄皇室圍獵、慶典、宴會，以及與會的重要賓客朝臣等。

行團往往延續數日，眾人駐紮於帳內，英王喬治三世（在位1760-1801年）的駐清使節，馬戛爾尼爵士（1737-1806年），曾於大黃幄殿內覲見皇帝，外交任務雖然終告失敗，他仍熱切地記錄了當時的情景：

「……極為豐沛，極為華美，極為恢弘，我的雙眼從未見過之景……這是世界上最優美的森林之一，草卉蕃蕪，古木參天，山石崢嶸，鹿群百禽，數量極多且不傷人。多處險陡山坡上，巨樹壯根，在最貧瘠之處，破岩而出，力拔山河。多為橡、松、栗樹，聳立於山巔，或環嶺而生，深藏於幽谷之中。不遠處，可遙望宮殿、宴會、大典，與寺院（但無僧侶），自成一格，別有洞天……」<sup>2</sup>

乾隆時期，秋獮幾乎年年舉辦，為此每年皇帝移居承德約二個月，雖偶因他事停辦，如東巡盛京謁陵祭祖，或接見重要外國使節團。乾隆十八年（1753年），皇帝大幅增加參與的朝臣官員與木蘭圍場的獵人數目，但隔年卻無秋獮，是否就因如此，身在江西的督陶官唐英（1682-1756年）致力於此年上交，繪有射獵圖的三元轉旋瓶？

乾隆十九年九月二十八日，景德鎮《清宮瓷器檔案》記載（圖一），唐英呈進一件「三元轉旋瓶」，三元意謂科舉考試中，鄉試、會試、殿試皆得第一；北京的《清宮造辦處活計檔》記錄（圖二），同年十一月初四日，上呈「洋磁三元轉旋瓶一件，隨匣木座」。五日後，奉御旨，此瓶交員外郎額爾登額送往熱河，無需贅言，如此精湛之作就是為此量身打造。

唐英，出身正白旗，年少入內廷當差，「多次隨康熙皇帝巡遊天下」<sup>3</sup>，極可能曾參與承德秋獮，見識皇家行團的輝煌壯闊；他亦無疑深知乾隆皇帝熱愛騎獵。唐英初期任職於北京紫禁城內務府，學習為官瓷畫樣，之後赴景德鎮督陶，親自監製、創燒各類重要御瓷與貢陶，並從多年經驗中深入理解製陶工藝之精髓。種種獨特背景因素交乘之下，方能在距離北京遙遙千里的南方，燒製出如此獨一無二、精美而雄闊的狩獵圖三元轉旋瓶。

## 「只要輕輕轉動其中一瓶的頸部，鏤空瓶腹內的三個內瓶，都會跟著一併轉旋。」

乾隆六年，皇帝罕見地訓斥了御審品質低落，促使景德鎮御審廠迎來清史上最大膽創新的一段時期。在此同時，北京紫禁城造辦處的瓷繪技術正值巔峰，甚至得宮廷畫師參與其中，競爭之下，御審廠需另闢蹊徑，以博帝王歡心。乾隆七年（1742年），被譽為「鬼斧神工」的鏤空轉旋瓶<sup>4</sup>，首次面世，製作工藝困難繁複而奇巧至極，燒造技術嫺熟精準，神乎其技，多數類例皆造於乾隆七年至九年之間。乾隆皇帝透過如此精緻美妙的鏤空瓷瓶，看到前所未有的新奇藝境：水藻間的金魚優游、騎著馬偶的孩童嬉戲、滿載貢品的洋人來朝，各式各樣趣味，股掌之間，盡收眼簾。然而，朝廷或感燒造費用過鉅，前述短暫時期之後，鏤空轉旋瓶的燒造數量急減，幾乎停產。







fig. 3  
A large sacrificial-blue ground famille-rose reticulated revolving vase and cover, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period, h. 60.5 cm. Nanjing Museum, Nanjing. After *Qing Imperial Porcelain of the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong Reigns*, Hong Kong, 1995, cat. no. 98

圖三 清乾隆 霽藍釉鏤空轉心大瓶 高60.5公分 南京博物院  
出處：《清瓷萃珍：清代康雍乾官窯瓷器》，香港，1995年，編號98

構造精密繁複，搭配讓人難以置信的精緻工藝，三元轉旋瓶讓人嘆為觀止，最初的設計發想與絕妙巧思，同樣值得讚賞。當乾隆皇帝朝著開光往裏看時，就像是透過御花園的窗櫺朝外望，古木蔥鬱，交織如網，彩雲瀾漫，空隙間可以望見，皇家行圍正在進行。此時，畫面開始轉動，野鹿、山羌飛奔於山林，緊追其後的是弓手快馬馳騁，箭在弦上，騎士擲矛用繩，獵犬相隨，喧騰熱烈，一切躍然眼前。

督陶景德鎮御窯廠近三十載，三元轉旋瓶，可謂唐英畢生成就之巔。本品無疑是他所督造中最繁複、最雄心勃勃的嘗試，或也是他督陶生涯最後的一件鉅作。唐英享年73歲，就在本品完成兩年之後。如此創新，讓人難以忘懷，三元轉旋瓶，是否就是唐英在卸任前，向帝王告別的磅礴之作？

三元轉旋瓶，獨一無二，是孤品，存世無相類之例。唯一略有關聯者是南京博物院藏，乾隆霽青釉粉彩行圍圖旋轉瓶，單瓶身，帶蓋，尺寸甚大，瓶身四面有圓形開光，同綴樹木彩雲，鏤空處可見內瓶的皇室行圍隊伍，兩側人民叩首作揖，見《清瓷萃珍：清代康雍乾官窯瓷器》，香港中文大學文物館，香港，1995年，編號98；霍華，〈清官窯霽青釉粉彩乾隆行圍圖旋轉瓶研究〉，《東南文化》，1997年，第2，頁132-140（圖三）。

<sup>1</sup> 有關承德在大清帝國的重要性，參閱 James A. Millward、Ruth W. Dunnell、Mark C. Elliot 及 Philippe Forêt 編，〈New Qing Imperial History. The making of Inner Asian empire at Qing Chengde〉，阿賓登，2004年。

<sup>2</sup> John Barrow，〈Some Account of the Public Life, and a Selection from the Unpublished Writings, of the Earl of Macartney〉，倫敦，1807年，卷2，頁273-4。

<sup>3</sup> 林業強，〈Tang Ying (1682-1756). The Imperial Factory Superintendent at Jingdezhen〉，《東方陶瓷學會彙刊》，卷63，1998-9年，頁65。

<sup>4</sup> 廖寶秀，〈華麗彩瓷：乾隆洋彩〉，故宮博物院，台北，2008年，頁39。

<sup>5</sup> 乾隆十二年（1747年）唐英〈圓琢瓷器燒造製價則例〉，詳列各種瓷器造價，當中帶耳者工料費用尤其高昂，比鏤雕尺價更貴；詳見林業強，〈Towards a Dating Framework for Qianlong Imperial Porcelain〉，《東方陶瓷學會彙刊》，卷74，2009-10年，頁30-31。



「如此創新，讓人難以忘懷，三元轉旋瓶，是否就是唐英在卸任前，向帝王告別的磅礴之作？」









9901

PROPERTY FROM AN IMPORTANT ASIAN FAMILY COLLECTION

A highly important and unique celadon-ground yangcai  
'hunting scene' conjoined and reticulated vase,  
Seal mark and period of Qianlong,  
Possibly made in 1754 according to Qing court record

masterfully conceived and constructed, the vase ingeniously formed from eight individually fired sections – the triple foot, the triple body, three inner cores, and three necks – each vase with an ovoid body rising from a splayed foot to a tall gently waisted neck and out-turned rim, the neck with four handles, opulently detailed all over against the celadon ground in gilding and silver with floral motifs and bands of lappets, each vase further pierced with a series of shaped cut-outs around the shoulder, above large openings on the ovoid section to reveal the inner cores above the interlocking cog wheels, as though looking through rounded windows in a garden wall through a web of trees and auspicious rainbow-coloured clouds into a dynamic hunting scene portraying mounted archers, equestrians with spears, and dogs, running through lush greenery in pursuit of animals, such as deer and boar – complemented with a mechanism whereby the vases revolve simultaneously when a single vase is turned, with the outer vases turning in the opposite direction of the central one – all three bases enamelled turquoise, the central one with an underglaze-blue six-character seal mark reserved in a white square  
h. 22 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of Chang Foo Yau (1884-1963), Manager of Ton-Ying & Co., New York.  
Collection of William H. Whitridge (1849-1936), Baltimore, Maryland.  
Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 16th-18th November 1939, lot 171.  
Collection of a Chinese-American family.  
Christie's New York, 2nd December 1989, lot 383.  
'92 Beijing guoji paimai hui [1992 Beijing International Auction], 11th October 1992, lot 38.  
Acquired from the above, and thence by family descent.

Estimate Upon Request



MARK







9901

重要亞洲家族收藏

清乾隆 御製洋彩粉青地描金內狩獵圖三元轉旋瓶  
《大清乾隆年製》款  
據錄或製於乾隆十九年

乾隆御製洋彩鏤空轉旋瓶，三元合一，機關精妙，鬼斧神工。鏤空開光猶若窗櫺，古木蔥鬱，交織如網，彩雲瀾漫，隙間窺見，皇家木蘭秋獵行圍。輕旋一頸，三瓶同轉，叢林秀石間，梅鹿竄走、野豬躍逃、山羌飛奔，弓手快馬馳聘緊追，如箭在弦，騎士擲矛，獵犬相隨，喧騰熱烈，一切躍然眼前，嘆為觀止。外施粉青，描金點綴，夔耳伴飾，更增富麗華美。

來源：

姚昌復（字叔來，通運公司總經理，1884-1963年）

收藏，紐約

William H. Whitridge（1849-1936年）收藏，巴爾

的摩，馬里蘭州

紐約帕克·博內藝廊，1939年11月16至18日，

編號171

美國華裔家族收藏

紐約佳士得1989年12月2日，編號383

'92北京國際拍賣會，1992年10月11日，編號38

購於上述來源，此後家族傳承

估價待詢



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